

DISABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The rights and access to education signifies that everyone regardless of disabilities, race, or religion should not be excluded due to their differences. However, the participation and inclusion of students with disabilities in higher learning might be a challenge to the students themselves as well as the campus community as the issues ranges from providing facilities, services and safety to ensure that the needs of students and staff with disabilities are met. This is a concept paper discussing Malaysia's commitment to persons with disabilities (PWDs), challenges faced by them in higher institution and those faced by woman with disabilities.

Introduction

World Report on Disability 2011 by World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank estimates that about 15% of total population of a country comprises persons with disabilities. In Malaysia, voluntary registration of Person with Disabilities (PWDs) is conducted by the Department of Social Welfare and there are seven categories of disabilities recognised by the country: visual impairment; hearing impairment; speech impairment, physical disabilities learning disabilities, mental disorder, and multiple disabilities.

Malaysia's education blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2012) is moving towards inclusive education model. This simply means the willingness to accept students with disability. It is the aim of the country that by 2025, every child with special needs has access to a high-quality education that is tailored to his or her particular needs and every teacher is equipped with basic knowledge of special education. Additionally, in November 2012, Malaysia has adopted the Ministerial Declaration on the Asian & Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 2013 – 2022 and the Incheon Strategy to Make the Rights Real for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and Pacific as part of its commitment towards building a stronger policy framework to mainstream persons with disabilities and to ensure their effective participation in the society. There are ten strategies involved in the Incheon Strategy to Make the Rights Real for Persons with Disabilities which includes: to expand early intervention and education of children with disabilities, to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment and to improve the reliability and comparability of disability data.

Various international studies have touched on the issues of social inclusion of young people or students with special needs in higher education (Korbel et al., 2011, Higbee et al., 2010, Hanafin et al., 2007). The complexities of disabilities which include dealing with multiple chronic health and psychiatric disorders in students and staff, may necessitate that universities need to accommodate beyond academic related issues in order to provide appropriate support (Korbel et al., 2011). Furthermore, non-communicable and chronic diseases accounted for 60% of deaths globally per annum and research mostly focusing on etiology, treatment and epidemiology disease and limited attention to non-clinical and especially social aspects of these conditions (Global Forum Research, 2004). Thus, issues highlighted might reach beyond physical aspects and acceptance towards

students or staff with disabilities, but more of the campus community's preparedness to accommodate these students and to ensure nondiscriminatory practices (Burke et al. in Korbel et al., 2011).

Guaranteeing access to students with disability on campus does not necessarily mean that the needs of these students are met. Thus, mainstreaming and inclusion of students' with disability in higher learning is probably a challenge to the Universities' administrators and the campus community due to various issues.

The paper discusses disability from a wider perspective before zoning into the issue faced by woman with disabilities in higher education.

Disability: Higher Education

Hanafin et al. (2007) in their study on the challenges of including young people with disabilities in higher education found that the built and physical environment causes access problems for physically disabled students and students with learning disorders such as dyslexia faced issues in following the class and getting lecture notes. Thus, their research showed the importance of assistive technology such as video or recorder in order to ensure that disabled students can engage and participate like their able-bodied counterparts. Hence, the complexities of disabilities which could either be physical disability, multiple chronic "unseen" disability or a psychiatric disorder means that the institution of higher learning needs to be prepared to accommodate the needs of students and staff with disability. Moreover universities especially high-ranking universities in the world such as Harvard and Princeton have a disability unit catering for issues involving multiple disabilities.

There is also the dilemma that students with disabilities face as they maneuver through higher education. They are faced with the option to regard or disregard their disabilities due to the negative connotation attached to the term "disabled". College is supposed to be a proving ground for the most capable students and the stigma of possessing a disability only compounds these negative feelings. In a study conducted by Camara (2011) on the experience of students with disabilities, the researcher found that many disabled students faced obstacles with regards to stigma associated with being disabled. These students wanted to feel included within academic. Additionally, none of the participants obtained accommodations immediately upon entering college and struggled through courses before getting the necessary help. This is more legitimate if the disability is unseen.

Furthermore, there is also the concerns over academic staff attitudes towards disabled students. Boursicot and Roberts (2009) reported their observations of staff attitudes that shows academic elitism where they perceived disabled students as less capable intellectually or less able to perform well. Madriaga et al. (2011) reported that disabled students who do not have university support underperform. Hence, if universities in Malaysia is going towards internationalization and would like to be recognized as an education hub, access for disability students and staff is an important aspect to consider. Presently not all universities public or private are able to cater for the needs of disabled students and staff.

Woman, Disability And Higher Education

Studies suggested that women with disabilities experience a double disadvantage (Ghai, 2006, Goodwin and Morgan, 2012). However, a study on impact, distress and quality of life among Malaysian men and women with a mobility impairment suggested men perceived their impairment to have greater impact on many life aspects which results in higher distress. This raises the issue of subjective experiences of disability in Malaysia. However, the female participants in this study were from rural areas, had less formal education and a lower

percentage of them were married at the time of the study. In other country like India, the pressure is much more for disabled females where penetrating the veneer of resistance that disabled woman confront in a society where the dominant norm that operates is that of a perfect/unimpaired body is a very difficult endeavour. The situation is a double jeopardy where the situation of being a girl and being disabled are both seen as liability in their culture (Ghai, 2006). Disability and gender/sex intersect in ways that have particular implications for girls. In Vietnam, sons are still preferred over daughters. Thus, disabled girls are not only girls with female bodies excluded from the patrilineal universe, but also disabled bodies. Disabled female bodies imply deficiency in respect to the reproduction of the patrilineage of their future husband (Rydstrom, 2010).

Besides issues of accommodation, transportation, access to resources and building geared towards disabled users, females in higher education face greater challenges. There is the risks of sexual abuse and harassment. Opini (2012) in her study on barriers to participation of female university students with disabilities in Kenya reported that participants had to be vigilant as men's tendency to view women with disabilities as easy targets for them to prey on. This creates fear and insecurity in these women. Additionally the female students in her study reported being discriminated in student associations, leadership, and in the classroom. Thus, universities need to look at improving physical access and addressed issues related to risks of abuse and harassment of female students with disabilities. In ensuring a learning environment that is risk-free, administrators need to promote safety and awareness programs such as providing transport, assisting in walking at night and a more holistic approach through community education and supported by policies and legislation.

Conclusion

Various literature suggest a procedure is needed if we were to implement inclusive education for all (Rydstrom, 2010, Ghai, 2006). This includes the monitoring body that ensures the implementation of the inclusive education program is done according to the needs of the disabled users. This includes to monitor and review gender sensitive routines that fit the needs and addressed the challenges faced by female disabled students and staff.

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